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# THE JEWISH QUARTERLY REVIEW

JULY, 1901

## ART AND JUDAISM<sup>1</sup>.

SOME years ago the Editor of an Art Journal requested me to write for him an article on Jewish Art. I replied that I could more easily write an apology for its non-existence. I shall endeavour to show why Israel has no art; how on the other hand Hebraism has affected the arts; and the relation that art bears to religion generally. Early in the world's history we find the two great models on the lines of which its subsequent civilization is developed—the Hellenic with its Pagan and perfect art, and the Hebraic with its conception of Monotheism, and with that the social laws that seem destined to last as long as man. These two great forces are essentially antagonistic, and, broadly, the result of the struggle between them is this: when Hebrew prevails over Greek, he strips art of its Pagan sensuality, so that its beauty stands revealed untarnished by barbaric or ungodly associations; the Greek, in revenge, seduces the Hebrew by the force of his Pagan luxuriance from that simplicity of life so essential to his continued existence.

We frequently hear the expression that the Jew is proud of his race. How many who use the phrase realize that

<sup>1</sup> A Paper read before the Maccabeans, London, on April 28, 1901.

Israel has sown the seed that has been fruitful of so large a share of the world's civilization; and then realize, again, how vital a force is character, and how important the maintenance of that character is to the Jew's existence and example. How far he can assimilate what is best of Hellenic influence without prejudice to his individuality is clearly one of the chief problems that beset the modern Jew.

The great leaders of the Jewish race have ever been opposed to the artistic reproduction of natural forms, more particularly the human form. Israel, both in Egypt and in Palestine, dwelt in the midst of idolatrous peoples, and often themselves bowed the knee to Baal. Small wonder, considering these backslidings and the surrounding temptations, that rigid laws obtained to prevent a people so assimilative in every respect as the Israelites, from adopting the often pernicious customs of the peoples amongst whom they lived. The mission of Israel in the past was to be a living protest against Paganism, and I shall endeavour to show that this is Israel's mission also in the future. Their special characteristic, "a kingdom of priests," imposed upon them a rule of life that should keep them rigidly apart from all who practised a different form of worship to their own. In spite of the rigidity of their laws (so often evaded when the force of public opinion is weakened), a set of laws, aiming at moral excellence and endowing them with a vitality which should enable them to exist through the ages, and aiming above all things to keep the purity of the race intact, and the people a separate people, the Jews have evidently lost in every generation almost as many souls as they have retained within the fold. A non-Jewish friend of mine asked me if I could explain how it was that the Jews who were computed to number about seven millions in biblical times were hardly more numerous to-day. A political Zionist might have answered that no more Jews were to exist than Palestine could contain and accommodate. In the

natural order of things, in spite of the direct effects of persecution and enforced wanderings, a fruitful race such as ours must have increased considerably.

I do not propose here, nor is it my province to try and explain all the reasons for this enormous disintegration, but it certainly points a moral. Israel will require but a comparatively small army to carry on its missionary campaign, and that army shall be composed of the faithful few who adhere strictly to the letter of the law laid down for them. We know that any tampering with that law, even if it lets in some light, lets in with it a destructive influence. There is little hope of a leakage, once made, being stayed, or effectively arrested. Now I contend it is the letting in of this so-called light that has, and ever will, help to alienate the majority of Jews from the in every sense narrow minority. This light is the cultivation of any science, literature or art that does not revolve around a circle at the centre of which stands the Godhead of Israel. If we must have the defects of our qualities, we may take it that religious enthusiasm, like all enthusiasm, partakes of a certain degree of fanaticism. No revolutionary has turned the heads of his following by mild protests, he must perforce be narrow, and concentrate his strength in the groove he has forged. None, or practically none, of the ancient Hebrews cultivated the plastic arts. It is clear that the artistic craftsmen engaged in building the first Temple were non-Israelites. According to Josephus, Solomon sends his greetings to Hiram king of Tyre, and says, "I beseech thee send some of thy servants with my servants to mount Lebanon, to cut wood there, for none among us can skill to hew timber like unto the Sidonians, and I will pay the wood-cutters their hire at whatsoever rate thou shalt determine." Hiram's servants cut in abundance timber which is brought down to the sea. Rafts are constructed and navigated to a point of the coast that Solomon designates, and thence the timber is conveyed to Jerusalem. In return for wheat, wine, and oil, Hiram

sends to Jerusalem a number of trained artificers, workers in metal, carpenters, and masons.

Rawlinson in his *History of Phoenicia* says: "It was a great advantage to the rude Judaeans to get the assistance of their civilized and artistic neighbours in the design and execution both of the Temple itself, and of all those accessories which in ancient times a sacred edifice on a large scale was regarded as requiring." The master workman lent by the Tyrian monarch to superintend the entire work was an extraordinary and almost universal genius. Son of an Israelite mother and Tyrian father, he seems to have been responsible for the designing and casting of the wonderful pillars known as Jachin and Boaz, which had their counterparts in the sacred edifices of Phoenicia and Cyprus. To him also is ascribed the "molten sea" standing on twelve oxen, the lavers on wheels; evidently no school or body of such skilled workmen existed in perhaps that most glorious epoch of Israel's history. We know that the reproduction of natural forms, more particularly the human form, was forbidden to the Jews. Art in such conditions could not flourish. All design is based on natural forms, and the key to the highest inspiration and appreciation of art is the knowledge of the human form. So that if a beautiful gem demands an equally beautiful setting, we may take it that a Greek temple of the best period was reared as the only setting that befitted the statue of the god or goddess of which it was the sanctuary. We may here trace the inspiration of the simple grandeur of Greek architecture to the gems of sculpture it enshrined.

Art reached its highest expression in the hands of the Greeks. Their mythology, so rich in imagery, so inspiring to the artist, so beautiful from the aesthetic side, could not fail in the course of time, among a race so sensitive, to produce the wonders both of sculpture and architecture that are unsurpassed and unsurpassable. It would perhaps be interesting to try and trace the evolution of Greek art

from the archaic types derived from the Egyptians to its culmination in the hands of a Phidias or a Praxiteles. I do not propose to trace its course historically, but to put before you my theory of its development.

Let us look into an early Doric temple at the archaic figure closely resembling the conventionally conceived statue of the Egyptians. Let us, for we are for the moment aesthetic Greeks, let us see between us and this stone effigy the well-developed youth of the age, moving in all their graceful nudity, and doubtless we should begin to yearn that our god were at least as beautiful as these divinely formed mortals. This yearning through the ages, stimulating a demand which in all things creates a supply, would produce for us a god as beautiful, at least as graceful, and moreover invested with the simple dignity with which the great artist, equally the product of our yearning, could invest him. We have reason to assume that the Greek ideal of a god was perfected human form. The Hebrews idealized and expanded human virtues. Herein lies the great difference between the Hebrew and the Greek imagination. The quality we understand by the word imagination is misnamed. There is no such thing as pure imagination. It is impossible for us to conceive anything we have not seen or felt. We can but make a new combination of existing forms, thoughts, and forces.

Thus, we see the Greek focussing mostly human passions and human frailties; clothing these human qualities in the finest symbolical forms they were capable of conceiving, and making of them their gods. Throughout the mythology, whether we take it literally or symbolically, human passion is the predominating note, and however beautiful may be the imagery of the Greek myths, they are nearly all coloured with a sensuous tinge. On the other hand, the Hebrew might, and perhaps does, live through the ages for the purity of the conception of his God.

Any of you may be able to trace the development of Greek Art at the British Museum from its earliest down

to its perfect stage. There you will find the figures and groups that decorated the friezes and the pediment of the Parthenon, mostly mutilated by barbaric Turkish soldiers, and saved to the world by Lord Elgin; but in spite of this partial destruction enough is left for us to be able in some way to estimate the unrivalled power of the great Greek artists, and the value of strong faith as an impetus to great achievement. The Italians, or perhaps I should say the Romans, imported Greek art with a similar form of worship to theirs, and then elaborated it. There it flourished, and there decayed, this artistic decadence presaging the general decay of the Roman state.

Here a problem confronts one. Why does art decay? It must be remembered that art, unlike science, is personal. Science is cumulative; each succeeding scientist lays on another stone to the structure. The artist given certain traditions practically works out his own salvation; his work partakes of his nature. The more individual his thoughts and feeling, the more original his output. If his power of expressing his individuality be strong, he may surmount the popular prejudice, and the popular taste, more often bad than good; if weak, he and his school may become the victims of passing fashion and fancy.

Now there are periods of restlessness among peoples. They become dissatisfied with classical traditions and clamour for something new. There is no surer sign of decadence than this desire for novelty. Hence the decay in art; and, in following its history closely, we shall find that its rehabilitation is nearly always due to a falling back on classical tradition. Such an instance the Renaissance period illustrates. After a long age of darkness the Italians renew for a somewhat different purpose the traditions of the Greeks. I say "somewhat different" advisedly, for if the Greeks were inspired by their mythology, the artists of the Renaissance found their inspiration and patronage in the Christian Church, that branch of the Church which is largely coloured by the remnants of

Paganism which naturally crept into it with its early Pagan converts, much in the same way as the sacrifices become part of early Jewish worship. It is quite clear, for example, that the Virgin Mary replaces the Venus and perhaps Minerva of the Romans; and by the way, the Christian artists of the Italian Church have done much by their charming and ever-moving works in this theme to provide an extra stimulus to its followers.

The numerous saints savour of Paganism. The service and its practices generally are so largely sensuous as to warrant one in asserting that the spirit of this Church is Hellenic. At this point in a few words I will try and sketch the Hebraic influence on religious art. When Christianity was introduced among the heathens concessions had to be made to their habits and prejudices. For those who had prayed to Venus a substitute must be found, and the Madonna was introduced as an important figure in this new Christianity. When we compare the attributes of these two figures we see how immeasurably more beautiful, in the Hebrew sense, is the Virgin Mary than the Goddess of Love. The Roman basilica is converted into a Christian Church with architectural changes, chiefly on a cruciform plan, suggested, as I imagine, by the converging passages where stood the altar in the catacombs. The Romanesque style gives way later to the Gothic and further developments. Here too practically begins the art of painting. The Church Patronage and the Princes of the time encourage the great workers and works of the Renaissance. We see that Hebraism in the form of Christianity is purifying art of the worst side of its Paganism. This is but a step forward in the evolution of its influence. Let us ask ourselves what, apart from the cultivation of the beautiful, has been the effect of the teaching of the Roman Church on its followers? Has it developed what are called the highest Christian virtues of charity, morality, and justice? What is now the comparative relation of the Latin races to the Northern peoples? The former were from the fourteenth



to the sixteenth centuries the great and all powerful peoples of Europe.

The Inquisition and the Armada are typical of the worst results of the influences of that Church. On the other hand, it has been the connecting chain of civilization across the dark ages. If there is design, and I feel we must accept the theory that there is, in the world's development, each great movement, more particularly each great religious movement, paves the way for a better order of things; and if the process to which I alluded with regard to the reverting of art to the best early forms after a period of decadence obtains in religious thought, there is at least some hope for the general acceptance of the simple tenets of Judaism.

In many ways the Reformation fulfils this theory. It is the natural successor in this sense of the dominant Church that preceded it. The Protestant has never to any great extent encouraged the arts. He is too Hebraic to suffer a sensuous form of worship in his churches, or I should say his chapels. Here I may state that I consider that a great part of Israel's mission is fulfilled in the teaching of the Protestant Church. It is clear that in religious thought Israel is more closely allied to the Protestant than to any other sect. The strict English Sunday is in spirit the Hebrew Sabbath. The Puritans of the time of Cromwell welcomed the Jews as the people of the Bible. The Puritan has not cultivated the lighter side of his nature. He has rather deepened and solidified his sterner qualities. Art plays no part in such a discipline. It has no direct moral value. The Bible has been his mentor, and he has kept within the magic circle of its influence, at the centre of which stands the God of Israel even though the Son looms large. His enthusiasm for his religion has jealously guarded against, as with the Hebrews, its usurpation by any distracting factor, and what is the result, let us say for example, on the English race? A stability, a sense of justice, a toleration that go to make up the characteristics

of a people, who to-day dominate the races of the world. And I claim that Hebraism, in this connexion synonymous with Puritanism, has laid the solid foundation for its many great parts.

If I deal lightly with the art of this country, seeing that in a sense it exists, I would explain that our art is so largely, as with the art of most Protestant countries, of a domestic order. Here again we see the Hebrew influence on art. Portraiture, landscape, and genre are the main themes. Of religious art there is not much. The church, except in the form of stained glass windows, does not decorate itself with pictures, so that we may say the highest forms of art are not much encouraged, and while England remains a Protestant country, religious art is not likely to flourish exceedingly. Still during the last generation a love of things artistic has been fostered by the English, and you will no doubt have observed along with its cultivation a tendency among the upper classes to greater luxury, and in many quarters a falling away from the simple faith and the simpler amusements of former times. Expensive dress, luxurious restaurants, a vast increase in the number of theatres and places of amusement, show, among other tendencies, that the great public has overcome its prejudice to theatre-going and the like pastimes, pastimes that were considered irreligious not so long since by many who now frequent the plays. Many quiet folk whose forebears read the Bible religiously every day are being carried away in the fashionable whirl, have become sophisticated and cosmopolitan in their tastes. They travel on the one hand, and the rest of Europe overruns this country with its wares unchecked. The Englishman is crawling out of his protective shell of Puritanism, and is getting restless and dissatisfied with the old order of things, since he knows of something more attractive to his senses. He is no doubt a little less dull and stolid, but he is in danger of losing his rugged strength of character. The source of this evil I think we can trace

partly at least to the Hellenic Southerners, who above most things have pandered to their love of luxury and enjoyment.

The emancipated Jew is in the same case as the Englishman, his best pupil. His Hebraism is leaving him. He is cultivating his lighter side, is a good deal ashamed of his old simplicity and childlike obedience to the precepts of his fathers, and his special characteristics—that is by far the best of them—are fast oozing away. This is one side of the picture. But let us consider whether in the present age, when every man must needs compete with his neighbour in general culture, it is possible to combine, as I understand the term culture, a knowledge of the progress of science, a love and appreciation of classic literature; the cultivation in fact of all that makes for the improvement of our taste, and the development of our intellectual faculties. I ask, is it possible for us to live on spiritual and theological fare alone? Separate as a people, many desire to keep themselves. They dare not, in fact cannot, foster all their medieval inheritances, but neither may they (to be liberal in my narrowness) cultivate their brains and the social manners of the day at the expense of their hearts, and a dropping of that discipline so necessary to the formation of personal character. They must remember that genius is a godsent gift, even though it seems sometimes to be used for an ungodly end, for no man in his senses will say that the works of any great mind, whether philosophic, artistic, or literary, can be ignored, all having their uses in the social economy. They should not forget that the proportions and the spirit in which such works should be assimilated is worthy of their attention. We go foolishly from extreme to extreme.

For the sake of illustrating my argument, I would liken a nation or an individual to a ship. The hull of the ship might fairly represent Hebraism, the canvas and bunting Hellenism, the amount of canvas the ship may carry depends on the capacity of the hull and the depth of its keel. If the

spread of canvas be too great for the hull, there is every danger of an upset. This points to the need of a solid foundation of Hebraic influence. So equipped, we may lay over it a superstructure of Hellenism without fear of weakening our character. On the other hand, a shallow foundation may be entirely swamped in the acquisition of the more fascinating arts. We see that in England aesthetic and Hellenic training generally tend to destroy the influence that a simple form of worship has had. The great middle class, largely Nonconformist, is so far firm. They fortunately represent the hull of the great vessel, and have since the Reformation, but, as I have pointed out, the tendency of the classes just above them, and every stratum of society looks just above it for example, is to greater luxury both in life and taste, and with it a gradual veering over to a more elaborate form of worship, importing in fact many of the practices of the Roman Church into its own.

I take it that the Jew proper is at the extreme pole of Puritanism. He has lived all through the ages with their varying vicissitudes as a witness to the efficacy of the law of life given to him by Moses. His mission it seems to me is to recall all humanity from whatever form of Paganism they may indulge, to the simple life that his—the Jew's—very existence proves the most effective against decay.

Pure Paganism has ceased to exist among civilized nations. The mythology common to the Aryan races, founded on the mysteries of natural phenomena, is dead. Its remains are to be seen and studied only in libraries and museum glass cases. Its soul—for everything which has lived has a soul, that is an influence—continues to flourish in an aesthetic and philosophic sense, but Paganism had to go the way of all things mortal. That of it which has attached itself to the great religious systems will some day also find itself in the catalogue of archaeological research.

In considering those great religious systems we find the God of Israel at their base.

I shall not deal with Mohammedanism ; I know too little of its inner workings. We can be satisfied that since Africa is divided among the European nations, its proselytizing force is at an end. With European countries, their history is largely the history of their religions.

Let us take the Roman Church. The God at its base is almost obscured by the Madonna, the symbol of the crucifixion, and the saints. It is of course a mighty and wealthy organization, and will survive for a long time yet ; but compare its power to-day with its former might, that is before the Reformation, when kings bowed to the will of the Popes. Only thirty years ago the Pope lost his temporal power even in Italy. The attitude of France to-day, of Spain only yesterday, of Austria and Italy, indicates a growing loss of confidence in the leaders of their Church.

The Protestant Church has only a comparatively small Pagan element in its constitution ; I mean the Protestant, not the higher forms of the Anglican Church, that stands midway between the Puritan and Rome. They are so Hebraic that even in their Trinitarian doctrine they make every possible concession to the one great Judaic dogma—it is known as Three in One. How many of the so-called Christians to-day are reconciled to the idea ? How many, on the other hand, have become Theists, Unitarians, and Agnostics, because of it ? And when that has departed, what is left ? The God of Israel. The founder of the universe is not generally denied, not even by the agnostic scientist.

Now if the Jew lives on to proclaim his God and his laws, very naturally others will ask, before blindly following his example, what is the result of his religion and his mode of life on the race ? Will that result attract ? I fear not. Appearances are at present against it. The cover of the book will not incline the critic to search for the hidden beauties that lie between its pages.

For the Jews of to-day, that is the Jews we know, are anything but an example. The masses are grossly material and self-indulgent. Can this materialism be traced to the effects of their religion, or only to social influences? It is to some extent to be seen both by the ultra orthodox, and the partial seceders, so that the problem is a complex one to solve: reaction from the repression of centuries may account for it. Certain it is that to the cultivated Jew, Judaism does not appeal with adequate force. It has no grip on the weaklings, who make no effort to meet it half-way. All attempts at reform are inartistic to a degree: with the reformed section, the whole Jewish service, both at home, where it hardly exists, and in the Synagogue, has been de-characterized beyond recognition, let down in fact to the level of a patronizing Gentile approval.

You may elaborate a structure to the point of losing sight of its great structural lines and the grandeur of its proportion, without weakening its foundation. This is what our forefathers in their excess of zeal have done with Judaism, but *we*, on the other hand, in *our* desire to simplify the fabric, ruthlessly cut away in our bungling methods some of its main supports and nearly all its characteristic lines. The orthodox in the eyes of the aesthetes carries an unsightly burden on his back. The aesthetic Jew carries nothing. The impossible extremest on the one hand and this almost only racial Jew on the other, with their special faults, are little likely by their methods or existing example to mould the thoughts of the outer world. Those who have hitherto attempted to recast Judaism seem to have forgotten that the religion is essentially a legal one. They have but skimmed from it what Western cultivation has taught them to consider its spiritual cream, as though a living and life-giving organism such as Judaism has proved to be could continue to thrive with an amputated body and a new heart occupying the place of the old one.

Its inwardness has of course been obscured by unneces-

sary excrescences that have cramped its natural growth, but if they are to be removed, they must be cut away with a skilful hand that can distinguish between the essentials and the non-essentials of its existence.

I am tempted to ask in conclusion, that as Jews are impressed with the need of their continued existence as a religious body, which implies a renewal of their spiritual influence, whether nothing can be done, and done legally, to make it possible for Judaism to exist with its character unimpaired in countries where Hellenic thought necessarily obtains, so that its future shall not depend entirely on an element which *persecution* alone has kept faithful to the traditions of so historic a people.

SOLOMON J. SOLOMON.